

Meatballs

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Meatballs is put out in the belief that a strong union at SHAP depends on an informed and involved membership. *Meatballs* welcomes different points of view. Contact Mike Parker, electrician second shift, body shop, or you can email meatballs@rts-tech.com. Publication labor is volunteer and views are those of the writers. For back issues go to www.rts-tech.com/meatballs

Contract Negotiations

What can we expect from these negotiations?

Our contract will be the result of many forces and the crystal ball is murky. But I offer the following observations:

Bad negotiators can lose everything. But good negotiators can win at the table only as much as they have the power to take. And that power starts with an informed and determined membership. The company has the purse strings and the backing of right-wing courts, and the government. They also have the media campaigning for them. And they apparently have the will to launch a major offensive against hard-won union conditions.

Union negotiators have on their side the fact that the membership makes the plants run and the potential support of other unions and the general public.

Forget the newspaper picture of lots of people including elected local officers sitting around a big bargaining table. The people negotiating the Chrysler contract for us are a few top leaders of the International Union and their immediate assistants. (see box), not the elected negotiators. The top International leadership sees itself as negotiating an industry wide contract; that makes good sense. Unfortunately many of them think the best strategy is partnership with management and participating in the "competitiveness" race to the bottom.

The elected national bargaining committees are important because they are the first gate that the contract has to pass after it is negotiated by the top leadership. But their ability to block a poor contract is also determined by the extent the membership is prepared to support them, and reject a weak agreement.

If the key to a good contract is membership preparedness and public support, the International leadership is doing a poor job. They have not focused the issues for the membership. They have allowed the corporation and the media to define the issues and publicize their solutions. For example, they have allowed the company to make the jobs bank seem like special privileges for do-nothing workers rather than what it is: the penalty for management's failure to honestly engage its workforce in productivity improvements by keeping work in-house and fully utilizing all workers.

They have allowed the company to paint their health care proposals as "cost cutting" rather than *transferring the costs* of decades of bad management to the people who can now least afford the new burden—retirees who built these corporations.

They have failed to let the public know that it is not special privileges, but the standards for all working people that are at stake. The leadership's refusal to talk to the press has left a completely open field for the corporations. The UAW's humiliating defeats when Caterpillar declared war on the union in the 1990s were in part due to the UAW's partnership strategy and in part to its belief that the UAW did not need support from other unions and the public.

While the 95% strike vote authorization indicates the members understand what is up, the leadership has failed to develop a contract campaign in the plants to get the membership ready and put management on notice. Where are campaigns to get people saving for a possible strike? Where are the union committees preparing on the issues so they can take them to community groups, other unions, and the local media? Where are the campaigns to let management in every plant know that we will not accept shifting the costs of years of mismanagement to our backs?

It's not too late to start now. The International has to lead. But in the end it is up to the members to stand up for our union and our futures. As a start let us send all concerned a clear message of basic solidarity: **no two-tier agreements**.

-Mike Parker

A published account that provides insights into the details of what really happens in auto negotiations is contained in reporter William Serrin's *The Company and the Union* about the 1970 negotiations and strike at GM. While some of Serrin's conclusions are dubious, people who have been involved in negotiations since that time tell me that his portrayal of **how** auto negotiations take place continues to be accurate. The elected negotiators spend their time in committees largely witnessing union staff negotiating language about non-economic issues. They have no direct role in negotiating the big issues. Here is some of Serrin's description:

Limiting negotiations to key people when negotiations enter the critical phase is an old practice. (p 210)

No one fully trusts the elected negotiators. They are ancillary figures at best, sounding boards for the union leadership... but mostly they provide the image to give the negotiations the smell of democracy. (p 212)

It occurs in almost every negotiation: an agreement had been reached between the union leadership and the corporation negotiators; now began the difficult task of gaining an endorsement from the [elected bargaining] committee—a committee almost completely ignorant what had taken place.... "Then it comes all at once--one big dump operation" (p 268)

Thank you, and goodbye

As most of you know, I took the retirement incentive early this year. A few days ago I was notified that this is my last month. My last day will be Thursday, August 30.

I leave with mixed feelings. I like my work as an electrician and particularly the puzzles of electronic controls. I like and respect the people I work with on the job and in the union, and I even respect some of the supervisors. Over the past eight years I have had many great experiences at SHAP.

I realize that I am one of the lucky few in this industry and possibly this economy. Not only do I like my work, but I am well paid and have good benefits. Most auto workers, particularly production workers, tolerate their jobs and work only to provide for their families. There may always be disagreeable jobs, but in my vision of a just world it is the disagreeable dirty jobs that should pay the most money and have the shortest workweek so people can get satisfaction other than from work.

I am leaving a good job. But it is time for me to retire from Chrysler while I am still healthy, can look for part-time work, and enjoy living in Northern California.

What I will not miss are the management policies designed to deskill our jobs, disrespect our knowledge, or reduce our work to that which can be ordered and monitored by a computer system. I will not miss the management policies that take good, enthusiastic young tradespeople who want to

learn and do a good job and grinds at them until they are embittered and here only for the money. Nor will I miss the management policies that make it difficult to take pride in the cars we make because they short-change quality to get better production or Harbour numbers.

I will not miss the petty management policies like the one which refuses to sign a simple form for employees affirming that we work here. I will not miss the management whose response to the heat is to put up notices telling workers not to use dunnage boxes to sit on outside the door during their breaks.

I credit the union for the good pay and benefits, as well as to the extent that skills are respected and protected. Without the union I would have no rights once I punch in. My ability to speak openly and write *Meatballs* is protected by our union.

I make no secret that I believe the International Union leadership has undermined us for a number of years. But that is our failure. The only solution that makes sense is to make the UAW a better, more effective, union. I am proud of Local 1700 and its leaders as a democratic and militant local, one which has stood up against the company and International Officers while others were backing down.

I am proud to have been an active member of the Local Worker-to-Worker Committee which represents what unionism is about—being there for others when they need it. Thanks particularly to Cheryl, Karen, Brett, Tony, and many more.

I am proud that this local was one of the first to vote a resolution against the Iraq War, its lies, and false assumptions, and proud that our Local helped sponsor a tour of Iraqi Unionists—that's true international solidarity.

I have devoted much of my energy at SHAP to trying to improve the skill level of electricians in the plant. When everybody learns and sharpens their skills the work becomes more interesting and we stake out our future jobs as technology changes. I have learned from many electricians, other trades, and vendors, and I have tried to help spread that knowledge. In the end, I believe that it is the combination of our skills and union solidarity that will give the union the power to make this a better place to work and the potential for making a better product.

There are several projects I participated in that I believe pointed in this direction including the Electrical Crib, *Body Shop Electrical Notes*, and various training activities. I am proud of these too, although they did not permanently get us to the next level as I had hoped.

Right now the union is in a fight for its very existence as well as our decent wages and conditions. I do not like leaving in the middle of the fight. Unfortunately this will not be a short battle but one which will be ongoing for years to come. I plan to continue helping as I can both as a retiree and as an active unionist.

So thank you again for the work, memories, and the growth. I hope to keep in touch with you. I will keep the email address: meatballs@rts-tech.com.

Mike

Get in touch with Labor Notes

For those of us who believe that rebuilding the labor movement is our only choice to protect decent jobs and conditions, **Labor Notes**, a monthly publication is an essential tool. It addresses **our** issues from **our** points of view rather than from management's. It lets us know that there are activists in other unions facing similar struggles and lets us learn from their experiences.

The current issue (September) has some long articles on the proposed VEBAs (the company proposals to shift health care costs to us). Every UAW member who wants to make an informed vote on the upcoming contract should check this out.

Labor Notes also has a regular conference of labor activists. About a thousand will gather in Detroit next April for a weekend to exchange ideas and assistance. I will be there.

You can find Labor Notes at www.labornotes.org or call 313-842-6262

I urge you to subscribe to Labor Notes (\$24.00/year) and plan on attending the conference.

MP

P.S. you can order your "TroubleMakers Union" t-shirt.